



## Health & Safety Alert #52-10-09

### Winter Weather Alert

When winter temperatures drop significantly, staying warm and safe can be a real challenge. Here are some helpful hints to stay warm and healthy during the cold winter months.

**Always wear the following to avoid cold related complications:**

- Dress in layers of loose, dry clothing.
- Be sure to have a heavy winter or water/wind resistant coat and boots.
- Be sure to cover hands, feet, face, nose and head very well. A warm hat (hood is critical as up to 40 percent of the body's heat is lost if your head isn't covered).
- Wear a hat, scarf and mittens/gloves

When exposure to cold weather occurs for long periods, health emergencies can occur.

#### **Hypothermia**

When exposed to cold temperatures, your body begins to lose heat faster than it can be produced. Prolonged exposure to the cold will eventually use up your body's stored energy. The result is hypothermia, or abnormally low body temperature. Body temperature that is too low affects the brain, making the victim unable to think clearly or move well. This makes hypothermia particularly dangerous because a person may not know it is happening and won't be able to do anything about it.

Hypothermia is most likely to occur at very cold temperatures, but it can occur even at cool temperatures (above 40 degrees Fahrenheit) if a person becomes chilled from rain, sweat, or submersion in cold water.

#### **What to do:**

If you notice any of these signs, take the person's temperature. If it is below 95 degrees, the situation is an emergency; get medical attention immediately.

If medical care is not available, begin warming the person, as follows:

- Get the victim into a warm room or shelter.
- If the victim has on any wet clothing, remove it.
- Warm the center of the body first: chest, neck, head and groin; using an electric blanket, if available. Or use skin-to-skin contact under loose, dry layers of blankets, clothing, towels, or sheets.
- Warm beverages can help increase the body temperature, but do not give alcoholic beverages. Do not try to give beverages to an unconscious person.
- After body temperature has increased, keep the person dry and wrapped in a warm blanket, including the head and neck.
- Get medical attention as soon as possible.

A person with severe hypothermia may be unconscious and may not seem to have a pulse or to be breathing. In this case, handle the victim gently and get emergency assistance (911) immediately. Even if the victim appears dead, CPR should be provided. CPR should continue while the victim is being warmed, until the victim responds or medical aid becomes available. In some cases, hypothermia victims who appear to be dead can be successfully resuscitated.

## **Frostbite**

This is an injury to the body caused by exposure to cold temperatures. At the first sign of redness or pain in any skin area get out of the cold and protect any exposed skin.

Signs/Symptoms of frostbite include:

- A white grayish-yellow skin color
- Skin that feels unusually firm or waxy
- Numbness

### **What to do:**

If you detect symptoms of frostbite, seek medical care immediately.

If (1) there is frostbite but no sign of hypothermia and (2) immediate medical care is not available, proceed as follows:

- Get into a warm room as soon as possible.
- Unless absolutely necessary, do not walk on frostbitten feet or toes; this increases the damage.
- Immerse the affected area in warm, not hot, water (the temperature should be comfortable to the touch for unaffected parts of the body).
- Or, warm the affected area using body heat. For example, the heat of an armpit can be used to warm frostbitten fingers.
- Do not rub the frostbitten area with snow or massage it at all. This can cause more damage.
- Don't use a heating pad, heat lamp, or the heat of a stove, fireplace, or radiator for warming. Affected areas are numb and can be easily burned.

## **Winter Weather Precautions**

- Avoid going outside without proper clothing including hats and gloves.
- Don't stay outdoors too long in the extreme cold.
- Make sure individuals are well supervised so accidental exposure to extreme temperatures is avoided.
- Understand first aid for Frostbite and Hypothermia so immediate attention can be given in an emergency situation.
- Prepare in advance when conducting outdoor activities and trips. Take along extra clothing, blankets, warm liquids, etc.
- Be very careful with any heating elements. (Space heaters, fireplaces, furnaces, etc.) Assure that all are in good working order before being used for the winter.
- Avoid walking on frozen ponds or lakes unless the ice has been checked and is safe.

For questions or comments regarding the above Alert, please contact the MUI/Registry Unit at (614) 995-3810.

**ISSUED: October 2009**